

A Closer Look at **ATTENTION DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER** From the Outside Looking In

Linda Anderson, Getting Clear

"In this article the abbreviations ADD and AD/HD will be used interchangeably."

Many adults with AD/HD, in their initial attempt at seeking a diagnosis, have heard the comment from their doctor, "But you can't possibly have ADD. You have a college degree." If this is also your assumption, it's time to look a little closer.

Before becoming a coach who specializes in working with ADD clients, I was an educator, administrator, consultant and professional organizer. It was my experience as an organizer, not as an educator, that first introduced me to the hidden and challenging world of AD/HD. Since I do not have ADD myself, the view I am sharing with you is from the outside looking in.

My clients with ADD are CEOs, teachers, programmers, artists, musicians and writers. They are lawyers, researchers, PhDs, MDs, and Pulitzer Prize winners. They are even coaches and professional organizers. While working with them I have witnessed their successes and shared in their struggles.

One might assume that people with ADD are surrounded by chaos, disorganization and failure. This can certainly be true, but not always. I have shared over and over again in the multitude of attempts, failures, cover-ups, hurts and regrets experienced by each of my ADD clients - a lifetime worth of it - lurking behind the outward appearance of success, even behind the façade of organization.

It was Fred who first led me to challenge my own assumptions. When I first met Fred, he was running three independent businesses out of his home office. Recently retired, he had just been diagnosed with ADD by an experienced neurologist. As he showed me his neatly contained home office, he sat down looking completely bewildered. I, too, was bewildered. The office was fairly orderly. As I began to listen and ask questions, I realized that Fred could put together a visually organized office, an external space, but he couldn't manage his internal space - his daily activities. He was seriously challenged with prioritizing tasks, dealing with distractions, and deciding which of his three businesses to direct his attention toward. His inner world was in chaos.

As an executive vice president in a major pharmaceutical company, Fred had his own highly competent executive assistant to manage the detail work and follow through. Fred's highly valued skills were allowed to roam free in the areas of innovation and creating successful relationships with top-level people. By asking him questions about his school and work experiences, and how he managed his day, it was easy to see that his intelligence and creativity helped him cover up a lifetime of hidden challenges. An exciting job, skilled staff and a supportive wife helped him negotiate life. It was Fred's wife, in fact, who led him to seek a diagnosis.

Fred, and many other clients like him, taught me that one cannot assume that people with ADD are at the bottom of the so-called success scale. Intelligence, creativity, a supportive family, and the right school or work environment, any of these, can help one achieve a degree of success, but it doesn't take away the underlying ADD challenges. It doesn't take away the pain experienced, which someone with ADD goes through trying to manage, anticipate and direct a brain that defies containment.

No matter what the level of apparent achievement, an ADD adult carries more than his or her share of shame, anxiety and an ever-present fear of making yet another mistake. Often running deep in each ADD person's life is a river of self-doubt fueled by repeated negative encounters and unkind words experienced throughout life. It is this trait that makes some of my ADD clients and friends vulnerable, sensitive and forgiving people. Certainly, not all people with ADD have reached a level of success in their work and schooling. Many have spent way too much time redoing things and dodging mistakes.

Rather than dysfunction and failure, however, I have learned to expect intelligence, originality, quirkiness, humor, and intuition from my clients. Their ADD brains move quickly making new connections. They get the whole, the gestalt, but have trouble breaking this whole into parts. They get frustrated trying to chase a thought down, before it has totally escaped and before the next idea takes front and center. This rapid supply of new and interesting ideas is their gift and their nemesis. It is why they need sensitive and skilled organizers and coaches.

Another client, Peter, helped me to understand the gift that lives side by side with the challenge of ADD. Peter was an American professor of Linguistics, teaching in a European country. For his own amusement, he designed a complex virtual reality website for the university to use in introducing students to the campus. He could get lost in such activities. One evening, he stayed up until 2:00 a.m. working in his office doing just that. The custodian unwittingly had locked him in. Peter spent the rest of the night on his couch. The next day he apologetically explained to me his ability to get lost in cyberspace, "You know," he said, "people with ADD . . . we think in hypertext!"

The hazard of hypertext thinking, jumping from one page, one thought, to another page or another thought, takes many an ADD person far away from the starting point. From the outside looking in, one might observe an ADD partner, student, or fellow worker focused on the computer or some stimulating task at hand, completely oblivious to the rest of the world, unaware of sirens and alarms, having forgotten an important appointment. An outside observer would be thinking, "How could this person possibly have ADD? There's no lack of focus problem here at all . . . just complete self-absorption, selfishness, in fact, and a lack of willpower to direct that attention."

What we know about an ADD brain hyper focused on something novel, exciting, and rewarding is that this brain is getting what it needs for the moment. All connections are go. This boost of neurotransmitters to the brain, however, is not available when the ADD person attempts to negotiate the greater part of the day, let alone the week, or attempts to meet the requirements of living in a world of routines and other people's expectations.

People with ADD, who have stimulating jobs, may be able to mask the traits and symptoms of ADD, which affect the rest of their lives and their ability to enjoy the very skills they have mastered. It would be wrong to assume that an individual did or did not have ADD, on the basis of apparent success in their career. Professionals who work with people who have ADD must look at a person's whole life and ask the right questions, which lead to uncovering the struggles, the healthy and not-so-healthy manipulations and the cover-ups.

An ADD brain bombarded by ideas, possibilities and inner conversations is easily overwhelmed. Rapid thoughts alone are overstimulating, but so are the messages coming through the senses. Too much stimuli, too many messages, not enough filters to protect one from the onslaught, leaves many an ADD person in lock down, unable to follow the conversation, afraid to go to a party, unwilling to make phone calls. How is it that the skilled musician who plays and composes can be completely worn out by distracting noises in a restaurant or theater? How is it that the artist who sees and paints in incredible colors has trouble directing his eyes across words on a written page? Gift or nemesis, which is it? It is both.

Initiating a new task and transitioning between tasks are yet other challenging territories. Waking up in the morning and pulling one's attention to the day ahead can be quite difficult for some who have ADD. Maintaining the mental energy needed to negotiate the required shifts in attention during the day can be equally tiring and frustrating.

Ellen, an estate attorney, would describe her problems with attention this way, "You know, I can't believe how hard I have had to work my entire life to manage my attention." When I commented, "It's like you're always trying to pull your attention around behind you in a wagon. You have to pull your attention to attention." "Yes!" she replied. Yet another ADD person might say that trying to manage his challenge with attention is like trying to herd helium balloons.

For someone with ADD, life overflows into too many incompletes, too many lists, too many ways to finish the chapter, too many ways to never begin it. Time, things, paper, appointments, collections, and information constantly overflow boundaries and become unmanageable. It's hardly any wonder that depression and anxiety can be frequently found co-presenting with ADD.

An ADD brain, which jumps and starts or lingers behind, also has the capacity to ruminate. When fixed on a negative thought, this negative thought can grow to unwieldy proportions. People with ADD suffer from an unyielding negative inner critic. Depression and anxiety may be what a doctor first recognizes in his patient. It takes thoughtful questioning and a skilled professional to discover if the depression or anxiety may, in fact, be related to AD/HD.

Dr. Ed Hallowell, author of *Driven To Distraction*, in his closing speech at the 1996 ADDA conference, shared a story told to him by a school bus driver with ADD. Coming to the end of his route one day, the bus driver parked his bus and turned around to discover all the children still patiently sitting in their places waiting to be delivered home. The audience laughed wholeheartedly with great understanding, each person likely thinking, "There but for the grace of God go I."

I laugh with my ADD clients, who frequently have a wonderful sense of humor - a gift born of necessity. They have gained a certain resilience from having learned to live a life of accommodation, circumvention and invention. I've learned to look behind the expertise and listen behind the laughter. I ask better questions to find out what they do well and where they experience challenges.

In my role as a coach, I always begin sessions with what is going right. ADD people need to hear what they are doing right, from others and from themselves. They need to have their doctors and therapists believe them, as they begin to share their stories, and they need to be asked the right questions.

My ADD clients and friends have had a lifetime of hearing, "If only you worked up to your ability. You're always late. Why are you always forgetting things? You just don't care." When there is success for someone with ADD, trust that behind it is a human being who knows she/he has missed great chunks of conversation, opportunities and relationships. They know they have never really demonstrated their true intelligence, but have succeeded while hauling behind, or trying to chase after, an unruly attention.

For those of us on the outside looking in, for those of us who work with ADD clients, patients and students, or who may be married to or in a relationship with ADD partners, we must listen closely and learn. For those who are wondering whether they might, in fact, have ADD, keep asking the questions, keep looking in books and on the internet, and make connections with others who have ADD and who "get it." You are not alone.

For more information about adult ADD
Attention Deficit Disorder Association <http://add.org/>
The World's Leading Adult AD/HD Organization
Don't miss the Tenth Annual ADDA Conference
"Demystifying AD/HD" in St. Louis, Mo, May 13 – 16, 2004

Additional AD/HD Websites:
www.add.about.com • www.addconsults.com
www.addforums.com • www.additudemag.com
www.sarisolden.com • www.brainplace.com www.chadd.org